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ABSTRACT

A human ecological approach to the study of children's television viewing raises questions that researchers have largely neglected. Does television influence the interaction patterns of socializing agents with children and with one another? Are there long-term, psychological consequences of unintegrated and competing influences from television and the environment? To what extent do emotional impressions, provoked through media, tend to be autonomous and disconnected from the child's overall comprehension? Does television viewing reduce the child's inclination to play and limit first-hand experiences? The perspective of human ecology suggests that the impact of media on children is likely to be more intense than it is on adults. Accordingly, preschool television programs should be designed to promote children's personal stability, not to attract large numbers of viewers or further specific aims of educational policy. Early childhood educators and parents should guarantee: (1) that small children watch far less TV than adults; and (2) that children are not left to face all media options without guidance or to cope with raw impressions unassisted. The tendency of preschool programs to focus on improving the child's ability to cope with an increasingly complex environment should be replaced by programs that are strongly child centered, care for children as individuals, pay attention to marginal transformations of their development, use a comprehensive approach, and above all attempt to support personal stability and open-mindedness of children. (Author/RH)

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HUMAN ECOLOGY AND TELEVISION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Klaus Schleicher, Ph.D.

I. Human Ecology

If adults have difficulty coping with the accelerating changes of modern life, children in their sensitive stages of development and psychophysical vulnerability are all the more threatened by technological developments, social mobility and environmental disintegration. The hazards of social mobility are related to constant insecurity and lack of identity due to dissolved relationships and changing value patterns. Environmental threats range from the physical dangers of chemical poisons and urban living conditions to the stresses produced by the media and broken families. In addition to these well-recognized problems, children suffer:

- because parents and educators have lost their pedagogical self confidence (due to the diversity of competing strategies in education);
- because researchers haven not really developed integrated educational concepts nor adequately considered long-term and side effects of their curricula (due to a high degree of specialization and the pressure for instant success of programs);
- and because educational policy is strongly geared towards functional abilities needed in society (e.g., modern math) and towards adult perceptions of the world (e.g., the need for income equality) but not towards the child as such.

As a result of this, preschool education has had to struggle with numerous problems. For example, because the expansion of preschool education was heavily influenced by social unrest, most attention was paid to improving the external life conditions of the child (e.g., a depriving environment and inadequate incentives for learning). Furthermore, preschools were set up with particular learning theories in mind, so that children were observed against linear standards of development (e.g., the testing ideology). Finally, preschool education was strongly aligned with school, so that an emphasis on academic preparation (e.g., reading and writing programs) was the consequence. Comparatively less attention was paid to the comprehensiveness of the child's individual experience (although it defines what is learned), to the inner structure and transformation of personality (i.e., to the capacity for absorbing and transfering educational stimuli), (Kornwachs, 1978, pp. 6 ff.; Möhlenbrock, 1979), and to inconstancies, discontinuities and bi-modal developments (e.g., what follows from conflicts of motivations) (see Sameroff, 1976, pp. 24 ff.; Tinbergen, 1972, pp. 104 ff.). As a result, preschool education served to a certain extent only a feeder function, with long-term and side effects not sufficiently taken into account, and with paradigms of research rendered inappropriate (Clarke et al., 1976).

Already in the 1960s there was substantial criticism of the schools, accusing them of perpetuating the cycle of deprivation (see Holt, 1964; Plowden, 1973). As one remedy, the enrichment of children's environments before school entrance was advocated. Supplements and alternatives to the earlier preschool concept were tested (Kinderläden, preschool play groups, Home Start programs). These developments demonstrated that effective early childhood education must begin with the parents (Gordon, 1971, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1974), that it has to be understood as a continuous process extending from birth through school (White et al., 1973), and that it needs comprehensive activities combining social welfare and health services, as well as media, with education (Appalachian Educational Laboratory, 1977; Appalachian Regional Commission, 1975; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1977).

In Europe an important movement arose from the community-based and parent-oriented play groups in England (Crowe, 1973) and from decentralized day care centers or parent-child groups organized as part of family education in the Netherlands and West Germany (cf. Niehuis, 1976) Predominantly these were mixed-age groups. Their emphasis was on the development of the child's own capacities as an individual and not on curricula; and they provided self-educating measures for parents through participation in the program (Schleicher, 1975b, pp. 231 ff.). One of the major achievements of this movement was that the emphasis of early childhood education in the preschool shifted from academic preparation to child development. Nevertheless, there is still a tendency to educate children more to cope with the environment than to develop their own personalities.

One of the more challenging concepts related to personality development can be found in the Rudolf Steiner approach to education. This philosophy, applied in Waldorf education, strives for the comprehensive development of the child, the integration of imagination, will power, social behavior and other learning capacities by means of playful self actualization and imitative learning (because one learns to be human only through humanity). The aim here is to establish personal stability rather than to develop particular skills (Kugelgen, 1973; Lievegoed, 1976).

From the point of view of human ecology, it seems advisable for early childhood educators to consider research results and social conditions, to avoid the alienation inherent in curricular systems (as may be learned from the play group movement) (Parlett, 1970), and to strive for a mutual activation of the child's areas of experience (Petersen, 1953; Dewey, 1969). In general, the feeder function of preschool education should be clearly limited,

and personal development of the individual child should be fostered.

After all, children and even embryos are not only in a stage of becoming human beings, they are already human beings (see Blechschmidt, 1968). Therefore preschool education cannot be planned in retrospect--that is, exclusively from the adult's state of development. Furthermore, children urgently need help to master their "inner world" as well as their environment, because the lability of the vegetative, cerebral and endocrine systems continuously increases (Ehrhardt, 1975), while children are faced with more and more environmental restrictions to organic, creative and practical experiences.

However, child development is burdened not only by the feeder function of preschool education but by research paradigms as well. Some characteristics of these paradigms are: that only those aspects of life which can be tested are considered to be real and that the development of the child is viewed as a continuous process of improvement. These accepted views of continuity and improvement (strongly molded by Protestantism, biological determinism, nativistic theories of development, retrospective research approaches, etc.) easily overlook processes of transformation that may be marginal (Zeeman, 1973; Isnard et al. 1975). Furthermore, unidimensional modes of explanation are not sufficient to explain biological and ecological processes (Parke et al., 1975, p. 579). At least until now, deviant behavior has not been sufficiently well predicted through structures which have been revealed in retrospect (Sameroff et al., 1975, pp. 189, 230); qualitative aspects of developmental processes can hardly be accounted for by a theory of continuity; and possibilities for educational action may be more concealed than revealed if the assumptions of continuity and linear cause-effect improvement go unchallenged.

A similar /consequence emerges from a strong alignment towards "normalcy." This orientation is a consequence of several factors, including empirical thinking, pragmatic decision making, and the "cult of normalcy" (Benne, 1969). An uncritical orientation towards normalcy easily leads to decisive reductions of the child's complexity as well as the ecological complexity. In addition, this orientation encourages an exposure of children to pressures of adaptation; it fosters uncritical attitudes towards the Zeitgeist in early childhood education; and it supports the creation of educational fads.

Even if preschool educators accept such views of normalcy and continuity, they must take into account the following research results:

- In the long run kindergartens seem to have the same and not a smaller effect than special preschool programs on children's cognitive and social development (Projektgruppe Kleinkindforschung, 1976; Moskal, 1976);
- There seems to be no curriculum which enhances the overall cognitive development of children in an outstanding way, but the relationship between the educator and the child seems to be most important for success (Smith, 1973; Weikart, 1975, pp. 489 ff.) Furthermore, there has been no adequate analysis of the value judgments inherent in different approaches to curriculum development, nor has there been adequate research on the socializing side effects and consequences of the implicit value judgments (Schleicher, 1977a, pp. 79ff.).
- According to international comparisons of achievement in different subject areas (e.g., math and language), early admission to school has no marked effect (Postlethwaite, 1974a, pp. 25 ff.; Postlethwaite, 1974b, pp. 258 ff.; Noonan et al., 1976, p. 36).

Thus, it is still pertinent to ask, as Robert Kennedy did in 1968 (Lewis, 1970, p. 16), where an optimal investment in preschool education should be placed. At least it can be said that one-dimensional training programs have little meaning to the children and only minor long-term effects in education, that curricula are far less important in early childhood education than was expected, and that the feeder function of preschool education is rather problematic (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Therefore, it appears almost self-evident from a human-ecological perspective that educators should favor preschool programs which are strongly child centered, care for children as individuals, pay attention to marginal transformations of their development, use a comprehensive and integrative approach, and above all attempt to support personal stability and open-mindedness of children. Obviously such a child-centered orientation is not without consequences for preschool television.

II. Television

Rapid changes in the visual, auditory, and tangible environments, and the quick mutations of individuals' habits and attitudes, are greatly affected by the development of communication technologies--mainly computers and television. We are not yet aware of all the long-term and side effects of these media. Nevertheless, the enormous impact of television is obvious--if one bears in mind the increase in television viewing during the last 20 years as well as the appointment of political and expert committees for the appraisal of its social implications (Report to the Surgeon General, 1972; Sloan Commission, 1971). An additional influence on society is, of course, the development of computer technology (Brown, 1970, p. 6) which is more and more interrelated with television.

Because most of the media, originally developed for mastering the outer world, are meanwhile somehow dominated by their own dynamics, it is hardly surprising that they are at the same time important educating and alienating forces. On the one hand TV is highly recommended for education of all ages; on the other hand it has remarkably changed the life style of the family and it challenges children in a powerful way. Preschool children have been growing up with television since the late fifties, and they increasingly participate in media viewing, even at night. Hence, the medium is a strong socializing influence (Schleicher, 1973, pp. 31 ff.; Schleicher, 1977b, pp. 9 ff.).

In the face of this situation, the broadcasting corporations in a variety of countries have reacted quite differently. In Great Britain a special program for small children was developed as early as 1953 (Watch with Mother, later Play School). In West Germany, on the other hand, it was officially recommended that young children should not watch TV at all. Furthermore, the minimum age for viewing was repeatedly raised (up to 8 years of age in 1958), and no preschool series were developed until the mid sixties (Programmbeirat für das Deutsche Fernsehen, 1960, p. 251). In the U.S., young children became the most dedicated TV-watchers in society, and their entertainment programs were heavily loaded with commercials and "bash, bang and burn" elements (Schleicher, 1972, pp. 16, 64).

Educational aspects of early childhood television did not receive much attention until there / existed some examples from educational programs for schools, a strong drive for an expansion of early childhood education to safeguard equal educational opportunity, and a sufficient amount of feedback from compensatory programs (like Head Start) to demonstrate that supplementary

encouragement in the home was desirable. The most important push for the development of preschool television programs came in response to Sesame Street, in the late sixties. On the one hand, the compensatory concept, the clear objectives, the thorough planning and evaluation schemes, the endeavor to provide additional learning material, and the sometimes overpowering selling strategy resulted in an international demand for and supply of preschool television programs. On the other hand, it is precisely because of Sesame Street's too narrow and formal objectives, because of its psychedelic methods, and because of its very limited compensatory effect (if there is any at all) that more and more important questions were raised. These questions include:

- whether training in formal skills really leads to new perceptions or perhaps prevents them;
- how short-term interests of children (encouraged by TV) can be extended, and how the child's own activity can be stimulated;
- whether or not children's way of coping with their environment calls for a clear separation of realistic, fantasy, and trick elements in television programs; and
- what long-term side effects result from TV viewing by children.

Probably, it is no mere coincidence that the side effects--if not the dangers--of the "plug in drug" are now perceived especially in the U.S., following ten years of Sesame Street (Winn, 1979). Attention is now being paid to mental and behavioral changes in children who are heavily geared towards TV, and there is a demand for more supervision of children's TV viewing. Some writers have even recommended that children be kept away from the "tube" whenever possible (Petitjean, 1978; Kügelgen, 1975). This viewpoint (though

on a different level of experience and discussion) is almost identical to that of the West German counseling committee's recommendation to TV stations in 1960 (see above).

In sum, over the last ten years there have been two patterns in the development of preschool TV in different countries. In countries with little previous experience, such as the U.S., Japan, or West Germany, large scale programs came suddenly on the market. They had been designed to use the capacities of the media and to further the aims of educational policy rather than with respect to the developmental capacities and personal needs of children. In contrast, countries with longer experience in the area of preschool television, such as Great Britain and Switzerland, did not have very high expectations with regard to televised education and were not ready to concentrate on cognitive training. Instead they used approaches similar to kindergarten to stimulate the child's own activity (Craft, 1971, Sims, 1971; Dölker-Tobler, 1979, pp. 177ff.)

Within the last ten years these concepts and strategies have had an impact on preschool TV in European countries. After an initially strong orientation towards the technical "know how" of Sesame Street, the half hour dramatized show as well as the magazine style program prevailed. The resulting European programs entertained in an amusing way, offered factual information close to children's own experience, and tried to promote children's understanding of interaction problems. There was little commercial-like animation and little training in preparatory skills for school but more continual endeavor to stimulate and "orient" the child's experience. The overall situation of preschool television in Europe is to a certain extent in line with recommendations of the Television Guidelines for Early Childhood (Mukerji, 1969) and with television series like Ripples, Around the Bend or Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

Altogether the preschool television programs in Europe are more homogeneous today than they were ten years ago, and they are better adjusted to children's experience in kindergarten than in the past. Nevertheless certain national preferences persist: e.g., the child's own activity is strongly promoted in Switzerland, England and Finland, while training in the cognitive domain is favored in France. In addition, it is still unclear in what ways the activities of television and kindergarten should be interrelated. Finally it must be stressed that most day care centers and preschools do not integrate TV programs into their work, and that many teachers, sponsors, and national representatives are not quite convinced that preschool television programs support / children's education or are really beneficial to children (Schleicher, 1975, pp. 31 ff; Council of Europe, 1977, pp. 15, 21).

The general importance of TV for preschool children is still up for debate. It cannot be properly assessed if one takes into account only the overall amount of TV viewing and the effects of preschool television programs. The child's mastering of the mediation effect / of TV has to be considered too, along with the fact that media are only part of a complex environment and a related socialization process. But, since the majority of children in Europe and the U.S. watch TV (in Europe about 1 1/2 to 2 hours per day; in the U.S. more than 4 1/2 hours), it clearly seems to be necessary to create specific TV shows at the preschool level.

There is of course controversy over how and to what extent children assimilate the content offered by TV. Here, evaluative studies seem to indicate that in the short run TV may be an effective medium through which simple skills and concepts in the cognitive domain could be taught, though the data

are not beyond question (Cook et al., 1975; Schleicher, 1972, p. 32). What still must be clarified is the long term importance of cognitive skills for the child's intellectual curiosity and capacity and, furthermore, what happens if the child's conceptual comprehension through primary experience is replaced by an assimilation of mediated concepts (Dölker, 1979).

Besides producing some "gains" in the cognitive area, the exposure to pro-social programs has been said to result "in increased pro-social interpersonal behavior" (Stein et al., 1972, pp. 202 ff.; Coates et al., 1976, pp. 138 ff.; Liebert et al., 1973, p. 96; Marencic, 1976, pp. 28-114). But until now, only limited and responsive behavior modifications have been observed. Even then, neither the social viewpoint of the communicator nor the recipient's purposeful action based on the recipient's identity has been sufficiently taken into account. In addition, the importance of complementary social and environmental influences has hardly been considered (Teichert, 1972, pp. 421 ff.).

Finally, the contradictory finding that children appear to be influenced by pro-social segments and not by segments showing brutal content needs to be clarified (see Report to the Surgeon General, 1973). Ever since the mid 1970s, when the supposed cognitive and pro-social effects of preschool television were tested (primarily in one-dimensional studies), it has been emphasized that television effects could be evaluated only as an element within a more complex socialization process. At least there were a few attempts to analyze whether television messages reinforced, contradicted or were irrelevant to messages from other sources (Anderson et al., 1976, pp. 104 ff.; Schramm et al., 1961, p. 169).

Until now, only a few basic observations have been pointed out in European studies:

- that parents, pre school educators and teachers differ in their attitudes towards preschool television (Bredow Institute, 1975, pp. 129, 136);

- that the more parents watch TV, the more their children watch too (Emnid, 1971, pp. 33, 48 ff.; Feilitzen, 1975, p. 146);
- that there is a stronger tendency to communicate during preschool telecasts if viewing is done at home rather than in day care centers (Bredow Institut, 1973, pp. 30 ff., 61 ff.);
- that selection of preschool programs is substantially influenced by parents (especially the mother) (Hess et al., 1962, Frank, 1974, pp. 16 ff.; Horn, 1966, pp. 361 ff.);
- that there is a marked influence on children's learning from TV if adults join them in watching (Leifer et al., 1975, p. 19; Grewe-Partsch, 1975, p. 77).

So far, studies have concentrated mainly on the intervening effects of television programs. Researchers have paid less attention to the change of interaction patterns of the socializing agents with the children and with one another. Hardly any consideration has been given to the long-term, psychological consequences of unintegrated and competing influences from television and the environment. After all, aside from comments on the teaching capacity of television and its meaning as an interacting socialization factor, there are some clues which show that the mediation effect of television - the effect of the medium as a medium, so to speak - should be of some concern. Although research is in the initial stages, it appears likely that the medium has some strong affective and emotional side-effects which have been underestimated. According to memory curves, apprehended knowledge decreases rather quickly while it takes much longer for emotional impressions to fade. Consequently, emotional impressions which have been provoked through media tend to gain a certain autonomy and disconnect themselves from the overall comprehension (Sturm et al., 1972, pp. 32, 38, 44; Sturm, 1973, pp. 22 ff.; Allouche-Benayoun,

1975, pp. 230 ff.; Huth, 1978). However, the psychic consequences of this disconnected emotional excitement have not been analyzed at all, although hints of Lorenz might stir up speculations (see Lorenz, 1972, pp. 41 ff.).

Some further concerns /exist about the emotional repercussions of television viewing. Some studies indicate that the preschool child who passes through a period of high activity and experimentation is forced into increasing passivity - if not lethargy - through extensive television viewing. that case, television not only reduces the child's inclination towards play (Firnkes et al., 1972) and limits the child's social and environmental first hand /experiences, but it may also reduce the basic learning drive and self-guidance of the child. On occasion, it might even provoke symptoms similar to a drug-induced state of mind (Winn, 1977, pp. 33 ff.; see Kügelgen, 1975).

Although not much is yet known about psychological effects of media viewing (disregarding content), it would be irresponsible to ignore the possible effects of TV on mental health. Consequently, the overall importance of preschool TV should not be assessed only in terms of cognitive gains and the development of pro-social attitudes. The psycho-physical side effects of TV viewing and the role of TV in the child's socialization should also be considered. From the perspective of human ecology, it can be stated that the impact of media on children is far more intensive than the impact on adults, since the children's emotional, intellectual and volitional capacities have not yet been developed through primary experiences (Brudny, 1974, p. 24). Furthermore, the inner strata of the child's mind are not sufficiently protected against interference, because children meet with television "as an object and subject of interaction" (Likhachew, 1975, p. 9; Zieris, 1960, p. 116) and sufficiently understand neither the content nor the methods of the media

(Sturm, H. et al., 1977, p. 175). This suggests that early childhood educators and parents should guarantee: (1) that small children watch far less TV than adults; and (2) that children are not left to face all the media options without guidance or to cope with raw impressions unassisted.

Altogether, /the development of preschool television programs seems to be desirable, since such programs are far more geared towards the needs of children than are competing programs. However, preschool programs should not be rated primarily on the number of viewers they attract or the extent to which they further specific aims of educational policy. Above all, preschool programs should be conceptualized as a contribution to the advancement of children's personal stability. As far as the content of preschool TV is concerned, there should be less preparation (for school abilities) because such programs tend to incorporate reality into ready-made answers and may easily contradict the child's own experience. In contrast, there is a need for programs which activate children's experiences with their environment and among themselves, because such programs could strengthen the motivation to master different stimuli and /they are more likely to promote the individual identity of children. To prevent the mediating effects of television from undermining such an experience-oriented concept, it is necessary to concentrate on half-hour dramatized shows and to develop multi-media components. The dramatized shows at least allow for emotional continuity and guide the children's attention in a concentric way (see the concept of "Pusteblume"). In addition, the multi-media components offer a chance for children to get rid of some irration, to pick up some television impulses and to work on

them in their own environment. Whenever possible the multi-media concept should be expanded by "compound measures." The simplest form of a compound system already exists, if parents join the TV set. Certainly it would be advantageous if there were more integrated family programs (cf., White House Conference, 1970, p. 250) or complex multi-media systems (cf., Noppa; Liikanen, 1974).

While it is clear that there are many problems (e.g., the amount of time children spend watching TV) that cannot be solved even by the most thoroughly planned TV programs, it is possible for parents and educators to use television in a child-centered rather than a media-centered way. Because we can expect an expansion in the development of audiovisual media in the coming years, and an accompanying increase in children's TV viewing, it is important that educators consider television in setting their goals. Previous goals have focused on social problems (e.g., inequality of income) or educational fads (e.g., reading drill, modern math), rather than on the child's own right for developmental particularity or the ontogenesis of the human personality. Now it is time for a new orientation in early childhood education, one that focuses instead on human ecology.

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90 Blank